

HELPING THE CHILD WHO HAS BEEN ABUSED

Adults can help children to feel good about themselves. This is really important for children who have been victims of abuse and/or family violence.

- ***Help the child develop positive self-esteem***

Children who have been abused often have poor self-esteem. Staff/caregivers can help to build a child's self-esteem by:

- planning activities where success is built in – these would be based on the child's age and development, and realistic expectations
- giving positive reinforcement for accomplishments and desired behaviour
- displaying the child's accomplishments
- reinforcing through discussion and activities that both women and men are valued, respected and should never be controlled through violence

- ***Help the child to trust***

Children who have been abused often feel betrayed and do not trust that their world is safe. Staff/caregivers can help the child who has been abused learn to trust again by:

- establishing limits, routines, consistency and predictability
- being loving and affectionate, and respecting those children who may need more time before they feel comfortable with being touched
- allowing children to be angry without the fear of punishment
- spending one-on-one time so the child feels cared for and listened to

- ***Help the child to identify and express emotions***

Staff/caregivers can help children who have been abused to show and understand feelings that may have been hidden or punished in the past by:

- naming emotions
- planning sensory and dramatic play activities
- providing books and other play materials that help children learn about feelings
- showing children healthy ways to express anger and solve problems without hurting themselves or others
- accepting a child's need to talk about fears, sadness and losses experienced because of abuse
- helping the child to gain control over the environment, since many children who have experienced abuse and family violence had little or no control in their environment

- ***Help the child to learn to communicate***

Children who have been abused may not have had opportunities for conversation and sharing in a positive parenting relationship. Staff/caregivers can help the child who has been abused learn communication skills by:

- speaking to children calmly
- using a firm but kind tone when asking children to do things or when expressing disapproval
- giving children the message that it is okay to ask questions and say how they feel
- spending time talking and listening
- planning activities that encourage language and listening skills

- ***Help the child to identify and solve problem situations***

Many children who have been abused have learned that problems are solved by using violence. Staff/caregivers can help children learn positive ways to problem-solve by:

- teaching children that they have choices and how to pick the best choice
- using positive methods to guide children's behaviour
- planning activities that require problem-solving
- solving any conflicts that happen with nonviolent methods, and role-model calm, non-aggressive ways of dealing with anger

- ***Help the child to catch-up developmentally***

As a result of abuse, many children have not developed at the normal rate. Staff/caregivers can help children with their developmental skills by:

- planning activities that help them practice motor and language skills
- supporting positive relationships with friends
- helping children with schoolwork
- seeking the advice of appropriate professionals (knowledge of atypical development and therapies is a specialized area)

- **Help the child to develop a safety plan**

Children who are in a situation where there is violence, or the fear of violence can be encouraged to:

- learn how to dial 911 (i.e., practice memorizing the phone number with the children; teach the children to leave the phone off the hook until police arrive)
 - choose a neighbour they can go to for help
 - plan how to keep safe during a violent scene, for example, identify a safe spot to hide, and do not try to stop the fight
- **Link families to community supports**

Victims of abuse and violence need support to cope with stress and to build healthy relationships. Staff/caregivers can help by:

- directing families to local community agencies that work with children and families (e.g., shelters, legal aid, help lines, parenting groups)
- watching how children in their care are developing, and reporting any suspicions of abuse

(Adapted from *Reaching Out: Working Together to Identify and Respond to Child Victims of Abuse* by Rimer & Prager, 1998.)